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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000432

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TERROR STRIKES ISTANBUL MASONIC LODGE

REF: ISTANBUL 375

11. (SBU) Summary: On March 9, a botched suicide attack against an Istanbul Masonic lodge left 2 dead and 7 wounded (reftel). Investigations continue, but police statements and assorted press reports suggest that there may have been a network of planners and accomplices, as well as connections to a murder last year and possibly even to the November bombings of two Istanbul synagogues, the British Consulate and the HSBC building (Note: Istanbul police have not confirmed the latter). Meetings with representatives of the Masons and Turkey's Jewish Community indicate a shared perception that "Islamic" terrorists have targeted their institutions. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Witnesses report that on March 9, 2 suicide bombers entered the Free Mason temple in Yakacik in the Kartal district of Istanbul, shot a security guard, and, while shouting Islamic slogans, opened fire on a Masonic lodge assembled for dinner. Police report that 4 of 14 bombs strapped to the bombers then exploded, killing one bomber and a waiter, and injuring the other bomber and several Masons. The bomber who survived the attack is in stable condition in police custody. The investigation has led to over a dozen arrests. Police have linked one of the weapons used in the attack to the murder last year of a Jewish dentist. One of the men arrested has since "confessed" to the murder. Istanbul police contacts told us that this suspect was also responsible for building the bombs used on March 9. Some of those involved (including the dead bomber) reportedly received terrorist training in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Another man arrested since the bombings (at the airport about to board a flight to Pakistan) was also wanted in connection with the November bombings (our police contacts could not confirm any direct connection, however, between this latest attack and those earlier bombings). The Governor announced last week that, in the course of this investigation, police had uncovered and thwarted a plan to conduct another bombing (note: unconfirmed press reports suggest that the target was a television network, aTV, perhaps chosen because of its "Jewish financing." aTV is owned by Dinc Bilgin, who, according to our Jewish community contacts, may, in fact, be a "secret" Sabbatai Jew).

Turkey's Long Masonic History

13. (SBU) A senior local member of the Free Masons told poloff that the Masons have been active in Turkey for most of the last two hundred years. With 13,000 active members and almost 200 lodges, there are Masons in almost every major Turkish city. The largest concentration is in Istanbul where there are 108 lodges that operate out of three temples that also serve as community centers and gathering places (Note: "lodges" refer to groups of Masons who typically meet once every two weeks at one of the temples). The recent attack took place at one of the three temples where one of the lodges was assembled for dinner.

14. (SBU) During the Ottoman period, the Masons are believed to have supported the "tanzimat" (reformation) movement in the late 19th century and the "Young Turk" movement in the early 20th century. Key "Young Turks," including Talat Pasa, Enver Pasa, and Cemal Pasa, were all reportedly Masons themselves. Additionally, many of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's advisers may also have been Masons. Our contact confirmed these rumors and argued that as a result of their support for these democratic and pro-Western reforms, Turkish Masons have been seen as "enemies" by "fundamentalist Islamists." This antipathy increased markedly over the last 30 years. Necmettin Erbakan and others close to him espoused anti-Masonic messages as they worked to develop successive Islamic political parties.

15. (SBU) The secretive nature of the Turkish Masons ("even more so than in the U.S., our contact noted) has generated an image problem for them in Turkey. In 1999, the then-Grand Master launched a public campaign to address this problem

(this included a public exhibit and television interviews, one of which was re-aired last week), but successive leaders have attached less importance to this issue. In general, our contact believes that educated Turks are either "pro-Mason" or "neutral," and that their principal problem is the "anti-Islamic" accusations that have poisoned their reputation with the more extreme Islamic elements of society.

Zionists? A Jewish Connection...

16. (SBU) Forensic evidence linked one of the weapons used in the attack to the murder of a Jewish dentist in Istanbul last year. One of the people subsequently arrested as a part of the ongoing police investigation "confessed" to the murder. Many Turks here are under the impression that Masons are "pro-Zionist," a fact bolstered by the large number of conspiracy theory-style Turkish books on that subject. Jewish Community Vice President Lina Filiba confirmed the widespread nature of such impressions. She told poloff the Masonic lodge bombing (and its link to the murder of a Jewish dentist) and last year's bombing of two Istanbul synagogues have underlined a pervasive fear in Turkey's Jewish Community that, after 50 years of largely avoiding tensions between Israel and Muslim populations, Turkey's Jews are now being directly targeted. The fact that the terrorists, fed a steady diet of misinformation, confused the Masonic Lodge with a Jewish target is no comfort, Filiba added. Now very concerned with the physical security of their gathering places, the Jewish Community leadership is struggling to take precautions and reduce their exposure to potential attacks.

17. (SBU) Last year's bombings of the synagogues, the British Consulate, and the HSBC building were a wake-up call for the Masons as well. Our Turkish Mason contact told us that the Masons received reports from the police of an anonymous caller "threatening to attack more Masonic targets" when he called to claim credit for the British bombings. In response to this and other threats, the Istanbul police added security details to their sites, but our contact noted ironically that because the police worked from "9 to 5," they were never in position to protect the Masonic temples during the busy evening periods. Since the latest attacks, however, he admitted that police security has been provided around the clock.

18. (SBU) Although the damage from this attack was limited, our contact was careful to note that news reports of "incompetence" on the part of "amateur" terrorists were incorrect. His understanding of the attack (from the police and from witnesses) was that after shooting the private security guard, the terrorists entered the large garden courtyard and opened fire on the glass wall separating the courtyard from the restaurant. Before they could reach the restaurant, however, one of the bombs detonated prematurely, killing one terrorist and incapacitating the other, before the remainder of the bombs could be manually detonated (presumably inside the building itself). As a result, the damage was minimal and only those closest to the courtyard were injured.

Comment

19. (SBU) Investigations into the attack continue, but early indications suggest that there was a network of planners and accomplices (some of whom may have trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan) and a connection with last year's murder of a Jewish dentist. Whether there was a connection with last year's synagogue and British Consulate bombings remains to be seen. In any case, the Jewish community and the Masons are convinced that there is a network of local extremists that remains committed to targeting their communities and anyone they deem to be working against the interests of Islam.

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